

# Barbara McLean

Editing, Authorship, and the Equal Right to Be the Best

by J. E. Smyth

In 1939, despite being a founding member of her union, she worked sixty-hour weeks. Regular hours were a joke. She worked nights, Sundays, Christmas, and New Year's Day. Although she got along well with her boss and could have been paid additional overtime, she was happy with her initial \$200-a-week salary. She supervised the work of her male colleagues, had more Academy Award nominations than anyone, and was known in trade-publication columns as "Hollywood's Editor-in-Chief." Barbara McLean loved her job. In an interview, she freely acknowledged, "I'd rather do this kind of work all night than spend an hour scrubbing a floor."

Although she's only a footnote in film history, a pretty, diminutive brunette at Darryl F. Zanuck's elbow, allegedly taking down his whispered orders in the editing room without comment, "Bobbie" McLean did not take orders. As she stated, "I've always been pretty fortunate in being able to put the picture in the first cut as I saw fit." Zanuck "listened" to her, and when they couldn't agree on a sequence, they'd often flip a coin. "Nine times out of ten I was right," she laughed. During the height of her power at Twentieth Century-Fox, she was discussing the scripts with writers before directors were even assigned. She was on the set as cameras rolled. With a word to Zanuck, she could get directors to shoot close-ups, protection shots, and even reshoot footage. If the director had left the picture, she shot them herself. She cut the way she liked. She liked to edit Westerns (Jesse James, 1939), biopics (Song of Bernadette, 1943), war pictures (Twelve O'Clock High, 1949), and historical dramas (Lloyd's of London, 1936). She was offended once when Zanuck suggested she edit a film about quintuplets because her gender gave her a unique perspective on children, and she told people that "naive" Henry King and Joseph Mankiewicz understood so-called "women's pictures" better than she did.

But Barbara McLean—a woman who arguably had more control over her studio's feature output than all of Zanuck's directors combined—was not alone. She was one of many prominent women in the studio era to rise to "top cutter," and there were dozens of female assistant cutters at each studio. Anne Bauchens, who cut every one of Cecil B. DeMille's pictures from

1918 to 1956, even dared to say it outright in 1941: "Women are better at editing motion pictures than men." In the years since the end of the Hollywood studio system, editors have arguably lost much of the original control they had in creating and reinforcing the language of cinema. We've been schooled to believe that directors are "authors" and that women in the studio era were on one side of the camera, marginalized by a sexist corporate system. Barbara McLean and her colleagues tell a different story.

**The untold story of Fox's "top cutter," who held great sway with Darryl F. Zanuck and the movies the studio produced, illuminates the history of women film editors in Hollywood.**

Many of the key female editors active from the 1930s through the end of the studio era began their careers in the late 1920s. For young Bobbie Pollut (she became McLean after briefly marrying special-effects technician Gordon McLean), editing was a family business. Her father ran a film laboratory in the E. K. Lincoln Studio in New Jersey, and she worked there during her summer vacations, cutting negatives and patching release prints. When she was twenty-one years old, she left school to take a job



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at the Fox Studios on Western Avenue in Los Angeles, and then, when she had learned everything she could from the head of the lab, applied for "a better job" at First National in Burbank. Ironically, when her future boss Darryl Zanuck and Warner Bros. took over the studio in the fall of 1928, she was fired and went to work with Mary Pickford and Sam Goldwyn at United Artists. It was here, among a cohort of independent production companies, that she developed a close relationship with Pickford, learned the value of the close-up, and experimented on her own with technique.

The introduction of sound gave editors more power than directors over the development of the cut. In the silent era, directors often cut their own negatives, using an assistant to take direction and expedite the process. Editors worked as technicians and glorified filing clerks, but some of the good ones learned their trade by watching directors. This was, for example, how during the silent-film era Margaret Booth remembered learning how to cut—by watching director John Stahl, until one day, when Stahl "couldn't get a sequence the way he wanted," he looked at a rough cut Booth had been practicing on with the outtakes and used that instead in the final cut.

Later, however, with the addition of the dialogue, music, and sound-effects tracks, editing became far more arduous and complex. Many directors didn't have the time, patience, or skill to edit picture with the soundtrack. The studio production system had also changed by the late 1920s, so that it became less efficient to allow maverick directors to rack up miles of footage and leisurely cut by themselves. The most notorious was Erich von Stroheim, reined in by Irving Thalberg, the man who created Margaret Booth's job as supervising editor and later associate producer at MGM.

Amidst this upheaval, McLean worked as an assistant editor on Pickford's first sound picture, *Coquette* (1929). At one point, she cut a word from the soundtrack that Pickford didn't like, and, "Well, you'd think I had performed a brain operation," she recalled. Working with sound and image tracks was more complicated than editing silent films, but McLean relished the technical challenges and loved the fact that in the early 1930s, "I could get to every department and do every-

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Barbara McLean, shown here in 1938, was one of the top film editors at 20th Century Fox, and was nominated seven times for the Academy Award for Best Editing, winning the Oscar in 1944 for her work on Henry King's biographical film, *Wilson*.

thing, even to do a good deal of working on music...You'd go on the scoring stage when they'd do the music, to see what he would be doing. You were there watching out for your own good. You know, to know how everything was going to fit. Each thing you learned a little more."

Later, separate technical departments formed and the work became more compartmentalized and constrained by union rules, but McLean's more freewheeling, collaborative experience at Pickford's studio and her own early musical training gave her an appreciation for editing as a kind of musical composition and scoring. It was this inner "rhythm," she and Margaret Booth would argue, that gave editing the power of an art.

McLean remembered her period with Pickford with affection: "This was a very close company." At Pickford's studio, collaboration worked on two levels: people worked for each other and with each other, often doing several jobs at once without complaint. As McLean recalled, "[I]f the script girls that worked on the set were sick, the assistant editor would run on the set and take notes." Artistic hierarchies did not exist. Pickford dressed her own sets and made sure the editors had tea while they

worked. Because Bobbie didn't own a car, the formidable co-head of United Artists "used to pick me up and take me home every night...When she left to go on her vacation, she'd send me a little note saying how wonderful it was that she could leave the picture in such good hands." It was not the last time that a producer would leave Bobbie in charge of the cut.

According to McLean, independent production companies, first at United Artists and later at the breakaway Twentieth Century, created a unique, family environment that defined her studio work experience. Although Goldwyn and Zanuck were hardly anyone's idea of mother hens, McLean argued that their work style mimicked Pickford's:

When you worked for these independents, when you worked for Mary Pickford, it was a whole family...When, at four o'clock in the afternoon, her maid would come up with a cup of tea for you and some little cookies, and take them right to the cutting room for you, because she always had that...It was like the whole family, so naturally you worked like mad because you loved every bit of it. You loved them, and you wanted the picture to be great, and you didn't mind how hard you worked.

Well, she minded enough to strike over pay in 1933. At the time, she was in the middle of cutting *The Bowery* for Zanuck's new Twentieth Century film company. Though Ed Eberle "didn't want to hire me back, because I'd been on strike," colleague Alan McNeil went to Zanuck and told him to rehire her because "I had worked on the balance of the picture." Zanuck, hearing only the name "Bobbie," said, "Get him back, get him back, thinking I was a boy." McNeil kept quiet and got her back on the picture. Zanuck "didn't know me from a hole in the wall," but rather than keep her head down, McLean quickly gained a reputation for speaking out at Fox.

Because of the confusion over the strike, Raoul Walsh was missing some footage on *The Bowery*. As she was telling Walsh about the missing film and the need to reshoot, Zanuck roared up in his car, fresh from a polo match. Walsh conferred with him and called her over to the car: "Bobbie, come here and tell Darryl what you just told me." She was direct. Reshooting was "necessary to the picture." Walsh may have used the pretty editor to soften the blow about the costs of reshooting, but Zanuck, to his credit, just respected her judgment and called Wallace Beery back to the set.

Some time later, McNeil had her accompany him to the projection room while Zanuck viewed the rushes with the editor. McNeil was supposed to take note of Zanuck's comments and discuss things with him, but he never wrote anything down and, as McLean stated, "would forget it or something." When Zanuck complained, "Why don't you do what I told you to do?" McNeil tried blaming McLean for not making a note of it. McLean, tired of being ignored and pushed to the other side of the room behind a tiny desk, was livid. "Now look, Alan, don't you pass the buck to me," she shot back across the room. "I can't hear what Mr. Zanuck tells you. Now, if you can't remember it, don't you blame it on me." As McLean recalled tartly, "From there on, Zanuck would yell the notes out so I could hear them. I suppose that's how he finally discovered that if I could hear, then we would do the changes." McLean's grit won her the right to cut the well-named *Gallant Lady* (1933) herself—the first time she received sole credit. Bobbie, a fine sailor in her rare moments away from the editing room, celebrated by christening her new craft *Gallant Lady*.

Zanuck valued people who could get the job done, and McLean supplanted McNeil and other male editors at Fox as she and Zanuck looked at the day's rushes. Some journalists insisted—erroneously—that she was Hollywood's only female "head cutter." Although McLean, Margaret Booth, Viola Lawrence, and Anne Bauchens all worked as "head cutters" or supervising feature editors during this period, studio publicity agents arranging syndicated press coverage or interviews with chief cutters sometimes liked the angle of one "great woman" handling everything. The studio in question looked modern and fair-minded, but the approach both enhanced and masked women's wider presence in the industry. Other journalists, however, including Amy

Croughton and a young Bob Thomas, drew attention to the many women who worked as film editors in Hollywood and the gender-blind way the studios assigned productions.

Bobbie liked being on the set throughout production and would take her own "script notes," which she would later refer to in production meetings with Zanuck. She adored one of Fox's top actors, George Arliss, who would meticulously rehearse his films from start to finish. McLean would sit on the set and watch, script in hand, mentally cutting the film as they progressed. McLean had been advocating more close-ups for top stars since working with Pickford. On *The Affairs of Cellini* (1934), when director Gregory La

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Cava "left to go to Europe or someplace," Zanuck had her direct the close-ups of Constance Bennett she felt the picture needed to carry audience interest. McLean "knew exactly where to use them," and, as she recalled, "I told the assistant director, Freddie Fox, where I wanted them and how I wanted to use them, and told him what to do...That was my first at directing."

Margaret Booth became very familiar with this scenario at MGM. As she remembered in the mid-1970s, even after Thalberg's death, L. B. Mayer would order retakes on any areas she didn't like in a studio film, and while she was on the set, she frequently went down to the soundstage and said, "I need a close-up. I can't cut that footage unless I have a close-up to replace it." As for McLean, she believed firmly that audiences demanded close-ups, particularly in love scenes, and it was personal drama, far more than spectacle, that drove public interest in photoplays. As she explained *Suez* (1938), the romantic epic story of Ferdinand de Lessops:

The terrible sand storm, which sweeps everything before it, is the dramatic highlight of the picture...In cutting it, we must retain the spectacle and the terror and yet the story with the necessary close-ups must be kept going at a good pace. Storm or no storm, there must be no slackening in the personal drama between Tyrone Power, Loretta Young, and Anabella.

It wasn't just close-ups that editors demanded and often shot on the set. As Anne Bauchens revealed for readers in an essay for Nancy Naumburg's book *We Make the Movies* (1937), "While a few [directors] insist on cutting their own pictures...they are very scarce." Editors had influence on the set. They were also instrumental in getting directors to shoot scenes from multiple angles. She argued that the "protection shots" editors called for and sometimes directed were used "to give variety to the telling of the story." Bauchens defended directors who shot multiple takes and versions, and disliked those who cut in camera, saying, "You can never be sure exactly which of these will best tell your story until you have cut it one way and then, if it does not look right, tried it another." Yet, obviously, Bauchens's preference for more film inevitably gave her and her editing colleagues more creative control over the final cut.

McLean pointed out that it was the director's job to give the editor the raw material to achieve the kind of rhythm necessary for good storytelling. She explained that directors such as Edmund Goulding liked to "shoot everything in one long take from beginning to end, but you intercut it." McLean kept a close eye on him. "You had to sit on the set with him in case you wanted him to cover it. He liked the flow of the whole scene, and I'd say, 'You'd better cover it. You'd better make a close-up.' He'd say, 'Well, you tell me where you want it.'" McLean went on to dismiss the new-fangled long takes favored by continental directors: "Half the time the scene doesn't hold up. When it appears on screen, it dies the death of a dog, it's so darned dull. Even if you just have a cut in it, it's better...you can just drop in one close-up without hurting it." While directors shot the script, editors found a rhythm in the images. As syndicated journalist Hubbard Keavy explained McLean's job to the public:

The cutter has to make sense out of all the stuff the director shoots, eliminating loose ends and poorly-made scenes, switching his continuity, simplifying the story and speeding it up, giving it rhythm and otherwise trying to make the picture so good that you and I won't squirm and get restless when we see it.

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Barbara McLean editing *Sing, Baby, Sing* at 20th Century Fox in 1936.

One of McLean's most important revelations about her work was that with many directors, and especially for her long collaboration with Henry King (thirty films), she would be on the set even before shooting started, script in hand, discussing things with the director, but also disagreeing with him and often getting him to shoot the scene her way. "I'd read the script and if I didn't like something about the script, I'd discuss it with him, and he'd tell me how he was going to do it." It was safer to agree with McLean because Zanuck always deferred to her judgment. King was so dependent on her perspective that he got paranoid when she wasn't on the set: "Every time I didn't show up on the set, he'd think there was something wrong with the film." At the end of each picture he'd say, "Well, you've done it again... Sometimes I don't know where you find the film to put on the screen because I don't remember having shot some of them." It must have been all of those extra protection shots and close-ups.

Over the years, critics have claimed John Ford's pictures were "editor proof" because he shot so little footage there was only one way—his way—to cut them. Auteurists cheered for the "great artist" who outwitted the crass studio flunkies and meddlesome producers. When McLean heard this old story again in 1970, she laughed. Her Fox colleague Dorothy Spencer cut Stagecoach for John Ford and Walter Wanger and later edited My Darling Clementine (1946), and McLean had experience working on Ford's Arrowsmith (1931) for Goldwyn and later Tobacco Road (1941) for Zanuck. "No, I never found that," McLean said. In terms of editorial oversight, Ford was no different than King or any other director with whom she worked. She was fairly terse about Ford, however, and Ford's sexism toward her protégé, assistant cutter Mary Steward, may have been the reason.

Along with McLean, Spencer, Sylvia Reid, Monica Collingwood, Hazel Marshall, and Florence Leona Lindsay, Steward was one of the original charter members of the Editors Guild in 1937, and was assistant cutter on Drums Along the Mohawk (1939) and The Grapes of Wrath (1940). As with McLean, part of her job involved going on the set to call for protection or close-ups if she felt the scene wasn't adequately covered. Ford disliked interference and used a demeaning tactic to curb her editorial power on the set. Interviewed in 2012, she would remember:

Every time I went to the set or out on location for business, Mr. Ford would always yell, "Bring Mary's gam box"—that's "gams" as in "legs"—and they'd put an apple box on the ground in front of me. Then he'd tell me I had to stand on it and turn around two times before I could open my mouth. I just wanted to get back to work.



Barbara McLean in 1952, editing what could be Elia Kazan's *Viva Zapata!*, Henry King's *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, or Henry Hathaway's *Niagara*, all of which she edited during that year.

No wonder McLean preferred working for Henry King.

Later in life, McLean resisted attempts to see the editing profession as feminine or subservient, but she also refused to highlight her gender as aberrant within the professional system of Hollywood. Like many working women of her generation, she believed in the Equal Rights Amendment, and resented any special treatment. In her postretirement oral history conducted with film historian Tom Stempel, she replied bluntly to his question about why there had been so many top female editors: "Why? Because you had to be good or you wouldn't get there." No one was turning her into a statistic to hurt the system that gave her and her female colleagues a chance.

One of McLean's all-time favorite assignments was the historical epic *In Old Chicago* (1937), where she was in her element coordinating the massive amounts of footage and sound effects (she used her personal stock of music to prepare a rough cut for Zanuck, something that annoyed composers but helped justify her cutting style). Journalists would joke that McLean height-wise "is the smallest film editor at Twentieth Century-Fox and cut its biggest picture." But with more Academy Award nominations than any other editor during her lifetime (*Les Misérables*, 1934; *Lloyd's of London*, 1936; *Alexander's Ragtime Band*, 1938; *The Rains Came*, 1939; *Song of Bernadette*, 1943; *Wilson* [won], 1944; and *All About Eve*, 1950), she didn't need platform heels to put down any man or woman who tried to patronize her.

Although in the last few decades, journalists and reference books have claimed that only eight women worked as editors in the studio era, there were a few more than that. As Editors Guild records and studio newsletters reveal, Caroline Ries, Lucille Tanner, Sylvia Reid, Monica Collingwood, Hazel Marshall, Dorothy Spencer, Mary Steward, Florence Leona Lindsay, Margaret Booth, Ida Jaediker, Lora Hays, Virginia Boland, Marjorie Fowler, Verna MacCurran, Iris Rainsberger, Virginia Lively Stone, Laura Jackson, Betty Lane, Lela Wetzel, Evelyn Kennedy, Erma Levin, Jill Vandenburg, Margaret Harfield, Jeanne Rochlin, Dena Levitt, Kay Rose, Eve Newman, Joyce Breeze, Virginia Gardner, Bettie Biery, Marguerite Sokolow, Rosemarie Hickson, Geraldine Lerner, Anna Kanis, Reva Schlesinger, Sally Flint, Beatrice Conetta, Mary Manfra, Alice Kellor, Wanda Rotz, Roma Crowder, Viola Brown, Mili Bonsignori, Angeline Sweeney, Irene Bazzini, Anne Bauchens, Adrienne Fazan, Eda Warren, Jane Loring, Blanche Sewell, Frances Marsh, Judy Barker, Lucille Jelik, Helene Turner, Viola Lawrence, Kay Fitzgerald, Lela Simone, Irene Morra, Eleanor Morra, and Alma Macrorie were some of McLean's colleagues. In production meetings, on the set, and alone in the editing room, their decisions helped shaped "Golden Age" Hollywood cinema.

Traditional auteurists, be warned. Your faith in film authorship may rest on insecure ideological footing.

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